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ABSTRACT

The procedures outlined in this paper have been used in English as a second language (ESL) conversation classes at the University of Guam. The technique is based on the training-group model used in sensitivity training and the "buzz group" technique taught in communications courses. The procedure is found useful because it provides an economic use of classroom speaking time, it can be adapted to a variety of purposes, and it is easily adapted to use with students at any level of language development. With the teacher as facilitator and the climate permissive, the students are enabled to engage in solving the "problem." The process as it has been adapted involves the following steps: (1) presentation of necessary vocabulary, (2) review and/or presentation of grammatical structures likely to be needed, (3) presentation of the problem to be solved, (4) formation of the groups, (5) reaching of consensus through discussion, (6) presentation of results, and (7) final summary given by the teacher. Nine discussion group topics are outlined along with a listing of necessary vocabulary and other data. (AMH)

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USING THE DISCUSSION GROUP TECHNIQUE IN THE ESL CONVERSATION CLASS

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In my ESL "conversation" classes at the University of Guam, I've been collecting and using a file of Discussion Group ideas to elicit student conversation. Many of our students who come from the numerous, small islands of the Trust Territory (Micronesia) seemed to be reluctant to speak out in large classroom groups, which include Koreans, Japanese, Filipinos, Chinese, and Europeans, so a less-threatening alternative had to be tried. That alternative was the Discussion Group.

The procedures for the Discussion Group technique come from the T-group (training group) model used by psychologists with groups engaging in sensitivity training. It's also similar to the conference* or "buzz group" technique taught in Communications courses.

When doing a Discussion Group, the teacher presents the students with a problem to solve. In small groups, possible solutions are discussed and then presented to the class for comparison or further discussion. During the small-group interaction, the teacher acts as facilitator and at the end may summarize group comment or give other possible solutions. (A step-by-step explanation of the procedure follows.)

The reasons for using this procedure in a 'speaking and listening' class (or even a writing class) are many: (1)It provides a more efficient use of classroom 'speaking time' since a number of students can be talking at the same time and it encourages all students (even the shy ones) to be active in language practice; (2)The tempo is lively and stimulating; (3)It can be done on a regular basis to draw meaningful utterances from the students; (4) It provides a context for vocabulary building; (5)It is easily adaptable for use with students at any level of language development and for improvment of speaking, listening and writing skills; (6)Practice is done in both small groups and large groups; (7)It can be used to practice or reinforce selected grammatical patterns.

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*A conference is a meeting of individuals who are meeting for a specific purpose--for example to learn how to manage stress or to look for a solution to a shared problem.

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SETTING A GOOD CLIMATE

In order for the students to relax and open up for discussion of the "problem," the teacher (like the psychologist) needs to be a good conference leader. Since the teacher's purpose is only to define the problem, facilitate in the discussion, and summarize conclusions, the process should be democratic, not authoritarian. A democratic atmosphere encourages effective communication.

Sometimes the solution to a Discussion Group problem calls for the discussion of students' personal values. In these cases, the teacher should show and encourage sensitivity to all opinions and cultural values. Opposing opinions can be tactfully debated but intolerance for an individual cannot, so it's useful to point out the difference between the opinion and the person presenting it. A light touch and a sense of humor will be useful here.

Most experts recommend a permissive climate as the best one. The teacher may channel or direct the discussion but needn't necessarily do so. He may lead but not dominate. Corrections by the teacher interrupt the students' flow of ideas. If the conscientious teacher feels compelled to note mistakes made during the discussion, I would recommend doing so privately (preferably mentally). Common mistakes could be reviewed at a later time.

PROCEDURE

Here's an example of a Discussion Group I've often used with intermediate-level students after they have been practicing comparatives and superlatives. It's called "Which Animal is More Intelligent?" The students will be asked to make a list of animals (from among those named by the teacher) from least intelligent to most intelligent. At the end of the discussion, the lists of each group will be compared to a "correct" list taken from a 1972 issue of Science Digest.

I) Vocabulary Readiness: Present a list of 10 or 12 animals to be used in the discussion. I like to choose pictures of animals from a file of pictures I've collected from National Geographic and elsewhere. List specific animals like 'snail' -- not invertebrate.

II) Grammar Readiness: Review structures that can be used often during the discussion; the teacher might ask/write questions like these:

(In your opinion) "Which is more intelligent--an ape or a dolphin?

"Is a dog more intelligent than a pig?

"Which is the most intelligent animal (on the list)?"

III) Explain the procedure: Tell the students that they are to make a list of animals (from the list on the blackboard) from least intelligent to most intelligent. Hint: Think of which are more evolved or higher on the evolutionary scale.

IV) Form small groups: Ask the students to sit in small groups of three or four--preferably of varied language backgrounds. When they have, tell them to select a leader(to ask questions and lead the discussion), a secretary (to write down the list), and a presentor (to explain the results to the class at the end).

V) Discuss: Students discuss while the teacher facilitates as necessary. To facilitate, the teacher might ask questions to stimulate discussion where necessary or merely listen in to various groups.

VI) Presentation of results: When all of the groups have completed or nearly completed their lists, the secretary from each group is asked to write his list on the blackboard. The presentor comments if necessary or if asked.

VII) Conclusion or Summary: The students' lists are compared to the "correct" list* from Science Digest and teacher/students may judge which list is most accurate.

"Which animal is more intelligent?"

1. Man
2. Apes and Monkeys
3. Dolphins and Whales
4. Flesh-eating Mammals
5. Hooved Animals
   a. pig
   b. elephant
   c. horse
6. Rodents
   a. squirrel
7. Birds
   a. raven
   b. pigeon
   c. parrot
8. Amphibians and Reptiles
9. Fish
10. Invertebrates

*This "correct" answer does not occur in most of the discussion groups. When it does not, the teacher merely summarizes or makes final comments.

SUMMARY OF STEPS IN A DISCUSSION GROUP

I. Vocabulary Readiness - present vocabulary necessary for the Discussion Group

II. Grammar Readiness - review and give structures likely to be needed in the discussion

III. Explain the Procedure - present the problem to be solved

IV. Form Small Groups - heterogeneous groups select a leader, secretary, and presentor

V. Discuss - reach consensus through discussion

VI. Present the Results - secretary writes lists (if any) on board and presentor explains results to class

VII. Conclusions or Summary - teacher makes final comments, summarizes, or gives "correct" answer (if any).

The following is a list of Discussion Groups that I have found useful:

Discussion Group 2 "Which Machine Was Invented First?"
(Intermediate level) (Use to practice passive voice)

Present to the students a list of about twelve (preferably through realia or pictures) of the inventions which follow this paragraph. Then divide the students into small groups to discuss and make a list of the 12 inventions in the order they think they were invented. When each group's list is complete or nearly complete, put the lists on the board and compare with the "correct" list as in Discussion Group 1.

Wheel 3000 B.C.
Screw 200 B.C.
Pulp Paper 105 A.D.
Gunpowder 1000
Printing 1440
Pistol 1540
Microscope 1590
Telescope 1608
Balloon 1783
Steamboat 1787
Photography 1822
Cement 1824
Gas Refrigeration 1834
Vulcanized Rubber 1839
Safety Match 1844
Safety Pin 1846
Dirigible 1852
Typewriter 1867
Telephone 1876
Phonograph 1877
Incandescent Light 1879
Fountain Pen 1884
Gas Automobile 1885
Movies 1889
Zipper 1892
X-ray 1895
Radio 1895
Submarine 1898
Airplane 1903
Atomic Bomb 1945

Discussion Group 3 "The Cheating Student"
(Intermediate to Advanced) (Use to practice modals should, must, etc.)
This idea comes from Peter Cole, "Some Techniques for Communication Practice," English Teaching Forum, Jan.-Feb. 1972.

Each student is to imagine himself as an instructor at a college. The college policy is that any student caught cheating will be expelled. While he is giving a final exam to a large class, the instructor sees a student copying from notes on a paper concealed in his hand. The student is a friend of the instructor. The students (as imagined instructors) are limited to five courses of action: (1) Ignore the cheating student; (2) Quietly ask him to stop cheating; (3) Take his notes and announce to the class that someone has been cheating and say that if it happens again the student will be expelled; (4) Remove the student from the test and explain to the class the reason for doing so; (5) as in (4) and report the student to the President, which means expulsion from the school.

After the students understand the problem, they vote by secret

ballot for the course of action they would choose. The results are not revealed until later. The group is then divided into small discussion groups to arrive at a consensus in the usual way, and finally the 'presentor' explains the rationale for the group's decision to the class The teacher as facilitator should circulate and be "Devil's Advocate" during the discussion.

Discussion Group 4 "If I had three months vacation and $10,000,..."
(Intermediate to Advanced) (Use to practice If clauses, 3rd form)
In small groups each student talks about how he would finish this sentence: "If I had three months vacation and $10,000, I would...." Discuss why. Presentor summarizes for the class at the end.

Discussion Group 5 "Which Profession Makes the Best Husband?"
(Intermediate) (Use to practice superlative like the best, the worst)
In small groups discuss and rank the following as to which profession makes the best husband, giving reasons for the choices and trying to reach a consensus. Then put each group's list on the blackboard and compare. Men should think of this question from their (future?) wives' point of view: Which profession would my wife most or least like me to have?

football player	skier
king	English teacher
night watchman	bullfighter
fireman	movie star
dress designer	singer
sailor, etc. up to 12	

Discussion Group 6 "Planning a Dinner Party"
(Intermediate) (Use to practice Wh Questions in future tense)
First the teacher uses food pictures to present or review food vocabulary. List four or five food items under each of the following categories: FRUIT, MEAT, VEGETABLE, DRINK, DESSERT
Then students meet in small discussion groups to choose a menu for an imaginary party, trying to persuade others to have his favorite food or reach a compromise. Only one item from each of the five categories may appear on any group's menu, so everyone in that group will have to eat the same kind of fruit, meat, vegetable, drink, and dessert.

Each group must also decide the answer to the following questions:

"Where will you dine?"
"Who will you invite (wives, boyfriends, the teacher, how many, etc.)?
"Who will pay for the dinner?"
"What will you do afterwards?"
"When will the party begin and end, etc.?"

Presentor tells his group's decisions to the class as usual.

Discussion Group 7 "Lifeboat"

(Intermediate to Advanced) (Use to practice modals, <u>should</u>, etc.)

In this Discussion Group, students must make decisions based on their perceptions of a person's worth. Seven people are in a lifeboat equipped to handle only five; now two must be abandoned and the students discuss who it should be.

During the "Conclusion or Summary" step, it might be interesting to examine the students' criteria in selecting who should die.

Did they tend to value
- youth or old age?
- male or female?
- usefulness to society or useless?
- sickness or health?
- perceived morality or perceived immorality?
- duty to job or to self and family
- strong or weak?
- educated or uneducated?
- those with family or those without close relatives

Then it might also be interesting to compare their decision to the "International Law of the Sea" -- women and children first, male passengers second, then crew and captain (who goes down with his ship?).

LIFEBOAT

An ocean liner sank at sea and seven people escaped in a lifeboat. Unfortunately, the lifeboat only has enough room and supplies for five people. Therefore, two people will have to abandon the lifeboat. The ocean contains hungry sharks, so those people who will have to leave the boat will die. You must select the two people who will have to be sacrificed. Justify the reasons why you picked these two and also justify the reasons why the other five should live. To help you make your selection, the following information is presented.

1. A one-year-old baby which is travelling with its grandmother. The baby is extremely sick, suffering from a rare but possibly treatable disease.
2. The baby's 55-year-old grandmother. She is in good health but has been depressed ever since the death of her husband.
3. The Captain of the ocean liner. He is 31 years old and has ten children. His wife is dead; he has no insurance.
4. A 42-year-old pregnant woman. Gossip on the ship indicates that she may be a prostitute. Her heavy make-up and vulgar language seem to indicate the gossip is true.
5. A 65-year-old scientist. He was one of the original developers of the atomic bomb which was dropped on Japan during WW2. His recent research might possibly lead to a cure for lung cancer in the next year or two.
6. A 21-year-old, very handsome university student. He is an All-American football player. He is extremely brilliant and has an I.Q. of 170. He is a homosexual and very active in gay rights.
7. A 72-year-old doctor who is a specialist in rare childhood diseases. Some people think he is a saint. But what most of them don't know is he is a drug addict. The police are investigating him because there is evidence he sells drugs to young people.

Discussion Group 8 "The Parable" (Intermediate to Advanced)

This idea is taken from Weeks' A Manual of Structured Experiences for Cross-Cultural Learning. (See Bibliography)

"Rosemary is a girl of about 21 years of age. For several months she has been engaged to a young man named -- let's call him Geoffrey. The problem she faces is that between her and her betrothed there lies a river. No ordinary river mind you, but a deep, wide river infested with hungry crocodiles.

"Rosemary ponders how she can cross the river. She thinks of a man she knows who has a boat. We'll call him Sinbad. So she approaches Sinbad, asking him to take her across. He replies, 'Yes, I'll take you across if you'll spend the night with me.' Shocked at this offer, she turns to another acquaintance, a certain Frederick, and tells him her story. Fredrick responds by saying, 'Yes, Rosemary, I understand your problem -- but -- it's your problem, not mine.' Rosemary decides to return to Sinbad, spends the night with him, and in the morning he takes her across the river.

"Her reunion with Geoffrey is warm. But on the evening before they are to be married, Rosemary feels compelled to tell Geoffrey how she succeeded in getting across the river. Geoffrey responds by saying, 'I wouldn't marry you if you were the last woman on earth.'

"Finally, at her wits' end, Rosemary turns to our last character, Dennis. Dennis listens to her story and says, 'Well, Rosemary I don't love you . . . . but I will marry you.' And that's all we know of the story."

This excellent Discussion Group brings out both personal and differing cultural values.

After the students understand the story, they are to rank the five characters in order of "best" to "worst." When the list is complete and each group's discussion is over, the group's secretary writes his group's list on the blackboard and the group's presentor briefly explains his group's rationale.

Discussion Group 9 "Survival on the Moon"

This interesting problem comes from Gail E. Myers and Michele Myers, "NASA Exercise" in The Dynamics of Human Communication (A Laboratory Approach).

Present the list of "intact items" as vocabulary. Form groups and rank the items in order of importance for survival under moon conditions. Secretary writes list on board and presentor defends list. Finally the teacher presents sheet of correct rankings given by NASA.

"SURVIVAL ON THE MOON"

You are a member of a space crew originally scheduled to meet with a mother ship on the lighted surface of the moon. Because of mechanical difficulties, however, your ship was forced to land at a place 200 miles from the meeting point. During the landing, much of the equipment aboard was damaged, and since survival depends on reaching the mother ship, the most critical items available must be chosen for the 200-mile trip. Below are listed 15 items left intact and undamaged after landing. Your task is to rank and order them in terms of importance to your crew in allowing them to reach the meeting point.

Box of matches
Food concentrate
50 feet of nylon rope
Parachute silk
Portable heating unit
Two .45 calibre pistols
One case dehydrated milk
Two 100 pound tanks of oxygen
Stellar map
Life raft
Magnetic compass
5 gallons of water
Signal flares
First aid kit containing injection needles
Solar powered FM receiver-transmitter

Correct rankings--official rankings given by NASA

		Rationale
15	Box of matches	no oxygen
4	Food concentrate	can live for some time without food
6	50 feet of nylon rope	for travel over rough terrain
8	Parachute silk	carrying
13	Portable heating unit	the light side of the moon is hot
11	Two .45 calibre pistol	some use for propulsion
12	One case dehydrated Pet milk	needs water to work
1	Two 100 lb. tanks of oxygen	no air on moon
3	Stellar map	needed for navigation
9	Life raft	some value for shelter or carrying
14	Magnetic compass	moon's magnetic field is different
2	5 gallons of water	you can't live long without this
10	Signal flares	no oxygen
7	First aid kit containing injection needles	first aid kit useful, but needles are useless
5	Solar powered FM receiver transmitter	communication

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*These publications all have excellent ideas for more Discussion Groups.